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Through the Looking Glass of Spatiality: Spatial Practice, Contact Relation and the Isis Theater in Shanghai, 1917–1937[†]

Xuelel Huang

Cultural action, the making and remaking of identities, takes place in the contact zones, along the policed and transgressive intercultural frontiers of nations, peoples, locales.

—James Clifford (1997: 7)

On February 23, 1911, the Isis Theater opened at 617 Second Street in Webster City, a small town in Iowa. The former theater house was now furnished with the latest in opera chairs and the newest motion picture apparatus.¹ Six years later, a movie house with the same English name emerged on the other side of the Pacific. This Isis Theater, whose Chinese name was *Shanghai da xiyuan* (literally, Shanghai grand theater), was located a block away from a concession of Shanghai under British and American jurisdiction. It was remodeled from an opera house formerly reserved for performances of Cantonese local drama.² Photos of the two Isis theaters show that the facades of the two buildings appear fairly alike (fig. 1).

The coincidental parallel features of the two Isis movie houses

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¹ *Webster City Journal* (Feb. 23, 1911).

² *Shenbao* (May 17, 1917): 13.



Figures 1a and 1b: Isis, Webster City, 1911 (top); Isis, Shanghai, ca. 1920s (bottom).

³ The concept of “modernity” has been central to the scholarly inquiries into China’s modern history. The conventional interpretation is that under the impact of the “modern” West, China struggled to revitalize

forcefully remind us of the fact that Shanghai was a cosmopolitan city in the early twentieth century and that going to the movies was intrinsically a transcultural experience for the Chinese people. This sense of cosmopolitanism is not unusual, and it can be seen as a byproduct of the modern history of China. The thrust of the most familiar narrative of this history is “China vis-à-vis the West,” and the impact of this encounter has been subjected to sustained scholarly scrutiny from a variety of perspectives.³ In this article, I take a “microhistorical” perspective to explore how the abstract “vis-à-vis” was transformed into concrete contact relations and how the contact relations unfolded in a particular historical space—the Isis Theater (hereafter “the Isis,” referring, unless otherwise noted, to the Shanghai theater). I demonstrate that contact relations between China and the West were never uniform, defying simplistic perspectives, whether colonial or postcolonial, Eurocentric or not.

My choice of the Isis as the focus of inquiry is based on the notion that *space* matters in understanding history and culture. This notion is inspired by what is termed “the spatial turn” in social and cultural theory in recent decades, which is itself closely related to the rise of postmodernism and echoes the accelerating process of globalization. The accelerating global flow of commodities, people, and technology has enhanced human sensibility to notions of location and spatiality, and postmodern theorists tend to give more attention to space than time, thus questioning old narratives of human history as a linear and progressive process. A wide range of critical thinking has been instrumental in triggering this spatial turn,⁴ reasserting the significance of space as a social construction important to understanding different histories of human subjects. Cinema is a peculiarly spatial form of art and has become one of the favorite cultural forms for critical interrogation (e.g., Harvey 1989: 308–323; Jameson 1992). Cinematic space can be understood within two categories. The first, *space in films*, involves the space of the shots, setting, story, and characters. The second, *films in space*, involves the shaping of lived spaces by cinema as

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a cultural practice; the spatial organization of its industry at the levels of production, distribution, and exhibition; and the role of cinema in globalization (Shiel 2001: 5). The latter form of cinematic space is the focus of this article.

To focus on the *Isis* is not a random choice. To be sure, the *Isis* is by no means the only theater emblematic of transcultural exchange. Shanghai's first-run movie theaters of the day were built in similar architectural styles, and the programs they offered were often of similar type—a small number of domestic productions mixed in with an abundance of imported movies. However, an important feature distinguishes the *Isis* from the others. As already mentioned, it was located near the boundary between Shanghai's foreign settlement and Chinese areas. This geographical peculiarity gave it a certain advantage, such as the possibility of evading censorship by both Shanghai's foreign administration and Chinese government, as well as others to be elaborated later. In a sense, the *Isis* is a sample par excellence of a "contact zone," a term coined by literary scholar Mary Louise Pratt (1992: 6) in her study on travel writing and colonial encounter and applied by anthropologist James Clifford (1997: 188–219) to his observations on travels and cultural contacts. In using the term "contact," Pratt proposes a "contact perspective," which "emphasizes how subjects are constituted in and by their relations to each other" and stresses "copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power" (7). The "contact perspective" is useful in analyzing the space of the *Isis* as both a historical object and a cultural text. On the one hand, by charting the historical variants of contact relations expressed in the space of the *Isis*, I show that some apparently "asymmetrical relations of power" actually took a variety of forms in historical practices. On the other hand, treating the particular space of the *Isis* as a cultural text, I attempt to shed some light on transcultural contact as a general concept as well.

I begin by locating the *Isis* in the geographical and (trans)cultural

itself through "modernization." Under this framework, for example, Shanghai as "China's most Westernized city" was depicted as the "key to modern China" (Murphey 1953), or "China's gateway to modernity" (Bergère 2009 [2002]). More recent scholarship engages in the paradigm shift marked by the reflection and critique of Eurocentrism. For example, Meng Yue argues that Shanghai at "the overlapping edges of both the Qing Empire and Western imperialism" fostered a "*border culture* that is often misleadingly named 'modernity'" (Meng 2006: 150–151).

⁴ See, for example, Lefebvre 1974, Foucault 1977, Mandel 1975, Berman 1982, Harvey 1989, Jameson 1992, Soja 1989, and Davis 1992. For introductions to the state of the field, see Warf/Arias 2009 and Shiel 2001: 5.

landscape of Shanghai and in the early history of motion pictures in the city. Against this backdrop, I proceed to examine the opening of the Isis and its contribution to the change of an asymmetry between foreign and Chinese situations concerning film exhibition. The ensuing sections examine two cases, the screenings of *The Thief of Bagdad* (dir. Raoul Walsh, 1924), starring Douglas Fairbanks (1883–1939), and the exhibition of Soviet films in the 1930s, in order to explore how the space of the Isis acted as a stage of struggles and conflicts at particular historical junctures and how the managers of the theater took advantage of its geographical peculiarities to grapple with censorship, the conflicting interests of different countries, and other problems.

The Isis on the Map: An Asymmetry

When the Isis was opened in 1917, the screening of motion pictures had already had a two-decade history in China. The first Chinese city this new form of entertainment reached was Shanghai. As a result of the Opium War (1839–42) and the Treaty of Nanjing, Shanghai was declared open for foreign trade in November 1843. Between 1845 and 1943, the city was split into three separate areas: the Chinese city, the International Settlement (formed in 1863 as an amalgamation of the British and American Settlements), and the French Concession. The British Settlement was located in the northern suburb outside the Chinese city. The French Concession was bounded by the Chinese city to the east and the British Settlement to the north. The American Settlement was established in the Hongkou (Hongkew)⁵ district north of the British Settlement and then later amalgamated with it to become “the International Settlement” (fig. 2) (Hsia 1929: 5–10; Lu 1999: 28–29). The areas under foreign control gradually expanded until they reached their largest size in 1915. Concurrent with the expansion was the development of foreign-owned roads outside the concessions, usually termed “outside roads” or “extra-Settlement roads” (*yuejie zhulu*). Problems of police protection of and conflicting jurisdiction over these roads emerged

⁵ I adopt the *pinyin* system for romanizing Chinese place names and put their old romanized names, which appear in contemporary literature, in parentheses when they first appear.

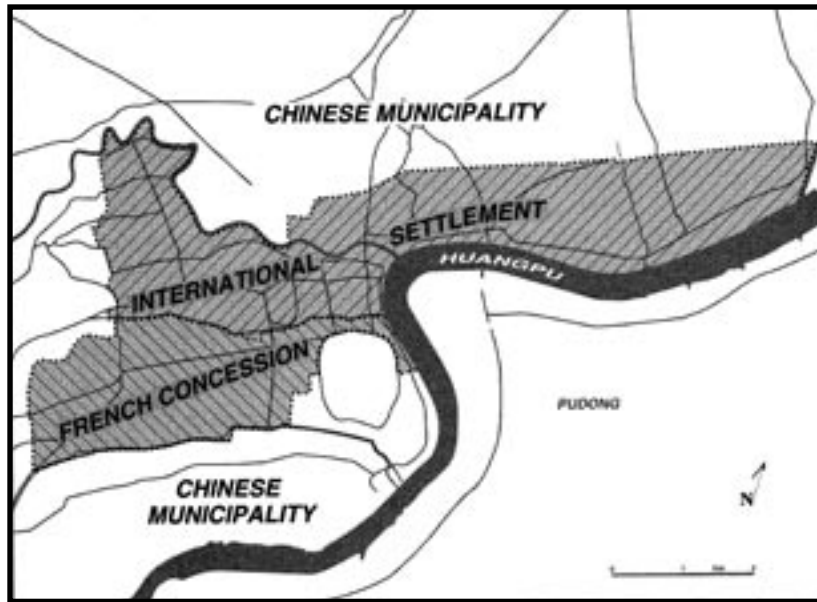


Figure 2: Shanghai, 1937 (Bickers 2000: 8)

and were never satisfactorily settled (Johnstone 1937: 200–201). The Isis was situated on one of the extra-Settlement roads, North Sichuan (Szechuen) Road in the Hongkou district (fig 2). This geographical location was critical to its cultural practices, as will be discussed later.

The foreign settlements were originally designed to be reserved exclusively for Westerners. But after the Small Swords Uprising (Xiaodao hui, 1853–55) and the Taiping Rebellion (1860–62), which led to a huge influx of refugees into the city, Chinese residents came to outnumber foreigners greatly in these foreign concessions (Lu 1999: 28). Transcultural encounters were, therefore, inevitable, giving birth to Shanghai's cosmopolitan culture.⁶ However, research has suggested that the relationship between Chinese and foreign communities in the city was often superficial (Bickers/Henriot 2000; Xiong 2003). Shanghai Chinese may have depended more on mass media than on the “aloof Caucasians themselves” to get in touch with Western

⁶ Many travel writings by foreigners contain vivid descriptions of the sense of cosmopolitanism embodied in street scenes, buildings, and expressions of lifestyle in Shanghai. For example, see Gascoyne-Cecil 1910: 104–105; quoted in Lu 1999: 38–39.

culture (Ch'en 1979: 233). In this perspective, the cinema as a new form of mass media and the physical places where foreign films were shown to a Chinese audience became important sites for transcultural contacts.

Motion pictures were introduced to China in the late 1890s, soon after their first public screenings in France and the United States. Earliest screening venues in Shanghai ranged from Western-style hotels and Chinese teahouses to private gardens and nickelodeon-style theaters (Huang/Xiao 2011: 50–53). At this early stage, film was principally accepted as a cheap attraction, which, in the eyes of the social elites, corrupted “public morals” because it invited “a mixed audience of men and women” (Anon. 1910). A journalist and writer named Wang Dungen (1888–?) even compared his movie-attending experience at a nickelodeon-style theater—a shabby room filled with cigarette smoke, noise, and disgusting odors—to “a journey through hell” (Wang 1912). The emergence of modern-style movie houses near North Sichuan Road within the International Settlement after 1908 gradually changed the negative image of moviegoing (Shanghai tongshe 1936: 533–563). The first generation of such theaters included the Victoria, Apollo, and Helen. All were run by Westerners, were “ornately decorated” (Shanghai tongshe 1936: 534), and “catered to the elite” (Kwei 1936: 982) (fig. 3).

In a bilingual advertisement for the Victoria Theater, its Chinese name was given as *Weiduoliya Xiguo yingxi guan* (literally, Victoria Western Shadowplay House) (Shangwu yinshuguan bianyi suo 1918). The ad’s emphasis on being “Western” was evidently an attempt to distinguish the Victoria from the ill-reputed Chinese-run movie houses. Foreigners constituted the majority, perhaps nine-tenths, of regular patrons of such cinemas, which provided a cozy environment, albeit at prices unaffordable to the average Chinese (Shanghai tongshe 1936: 534). For example, in 1918, the Victoria charged \$1.20 for a seat in the “dress circle” and \$.70 for a stall seat, whereas in July 1916, a Chinese-run theater located in the Chinese city charged only \$.10 and \$.20, respectively.⁷ The average monthly salary

⁷ See *Shenbao* (July 22, 1916): 13. The dollar sign (\$) indicates the Mexican dollar (*yuan* in Chinese), which was the most universally used money in Shanghai at the time. For more details about Chinese currency at the time, see Darwent 1904: v–vii.

“Spatial Modernity” versus Chinese “Essence”: The Opening of the Isis

The Isis was declared open on May 17, 1917. Its chief manager was the Cantonese merchant Zeng Huantang (d. 1949), and it is therefore usually labeled, in conventional narratives of Chinese film history, “the first Chinese-run movie house in Shanghai” (Wang 1999: 1032; see also Zhang 2008). Contemporary records also stress its specific role in the development of Shanghai’s theater landscape. It was claimed to be “the only Chinese-run movie theater capable of competing with those run by foreigners” (Ren 1925) and to have played a critical role in drawing Shanghai’s Chinese residents into cinemas and in urging foreign theater owners to note Chinese clients’ needs (Shanghai tongshe 1936: 534). How did the Isis manage to achieve such a success, and what was its impact on contact relations between “Chinese” and “the West” in a broad sense? I argue that some spatial features matter in terms of both its commercial success and the broader cultural meaning. The features are suggested in a *Shenbao* advertisement promoting the Isis’s grand opening. The ad includes a detailed publicity text, with information about its programming and admission.⁸ The text describes the program for the opening of the theater: a detective serial and a comic short.⁹ Admission is five-tiered, with prices ranging from \$.10 to \$.70, substantially cheaper than what the Victoria charged at around the same time. The long text begins by stating that the motion picture is a “civilized” form of entertainment and can “introduce new knowledge and improve social mores,” but it laments that the “grandiose” foreign motion picture houses charge high prices and the cheaper Chinese cinemas lack comfort and hygiene. Then the author boasts that although the Isis is “modeled after Western-style theaters,” it preserves “the Chinese essence,” which means that it charges low prices affordable to the average audience. Regarding the “Western style,” the author emphasizes the high quality of its equipment, mostly of European origin, and the fact that it imports its movies from prestigious European

⁸ See *Shenbao* (May 17, 1917): 13. Subsequent references to this advertisement are all from this source.

⁹ Film titles are only given in Chinese: *Yaodang* (literally, Evil party) and *Qiangdao ban butou* (literally, Bandits disguised as policemen). It is difficult to identify their original English titles. These were most probably American films, because American detective serials and comedies were the most popular film genres among Chinese audiences at the time. See Chen 2007: 65–67.

and American film studios.

The author then proudly introduces two spatial features of the Isis. The first concerns the theater's location "at the intersection of North Sichuan Road and Qiujiang (Jukong) Road . . . easily reachable by trams, cars and carriages." Situated on this extra-Settlement road, the Isis was about 500 meters north of the boundary of the International Settlement (see fig. 3). The other three leading movie houses in the vicinity, the Victoria, Apollo, and Helen, were all located within the International Settlement, 700 meters south of the settlement boundary. Given the geographical size of the city at the time, 1,200 meters is not a short distance psychologically. A contemporary author complained that the Isis was located "in an extremely remote northern area," but, amazingly, it managed to "draw residents of South Shanghai, not only the Chinese but also Westerners, to come over regardless of the long distance they had to go" (Ren 1925). We may speculate that the critical reason lay in the good value the Isis offered with its reasonable prices. Its attractive admission was indeed closely related to the spatial feature I am discussing. As is known, Shanghai's land value was in inverse proportion to the distance from the Bund and Nanjing Road, the center of the International Settlement and the most expensive area in the city (Luo 2003: 81; Lu 1999: 141). We can be certain that the rental rate of the Isis was lower than that of Western competitors located much closer to the city center.

Though the theater lay outside the settlement, moviegoers still had convenient access to it, as its advertisement promised, via North Sichuan Road, an asphalt road laid out in 1903 (Xu 1980: 89), and a tramline running through the city center to the Hongkou district (Shangwu yinshu guan bianyi suo 1918: n.p.). Following the construction of North Sichuan Road, the Municipal Council built Hongkou Park, a rifle range, and two public swimming pools in the neighborhood (Xu 1980: 98–99). These infrastructure improvements transformed North Sichuan Road into Shanghai's third busiest area, after Nanjing Road and Fuzhou (Foochow)

Road (Shanghai xintuo gongsi 1932: 10). At the same time, this district was well known for being an “enclave” whose administrative control and police jurisdiction were complicated by the “extra-Settlement road” controversies (Johnstone 1937: 215–217). Because of its ambiguous administrative status, this area abounded in nightclubs, bars, gambling dens, and brothels, which attracted crowds of foreign sailors and soldiers as well as “those living in Shanghai who sought adventures and services not offered in the upscale establishments within settlements” (Field 2010: 39). Beyond that, government opponents also exploited the relative freedom of this area to undertake secret activities. In 1930, for example, the Chinese Communist Party’s underground League of Left-wing Writers (Zuolian) chose a building within this area for its inaugural ceremony because they knew it was “in effect a no man’s land, and thus an ideal place for left-wing activities” (Wong 1991: 59). In the same neighborhood, the Isis enjoyed the spatial advantages of North Sichuan Road that allowed it to evade censorship and to show otherwise prohibited films on sensitive or taboo themes such as revolution, lust, and crime. (I discuss this in detail in the last section.)

The physical structure of the Isis also played an essential part in attracting a wide audience. The *Shenbao* advertisement describes the theater in ornate parallel prose as having “spectacular” (*huali*) architecture, “sophisticated” (*yazhi*) interior designs, “spacious” (*kuanchang*) seating, and “clean” (*qingshuang*) air. In boasting of these characteristics, the author of the publicity obviously wants to impress on a potential clientele what I would call the “spatial modernity” of the theater. As mentioned earlier, the author regards the motion picture as a “civilized” form of entertainment, and these spatial features were certainly aligned with “modernity” or “civilization.” Narratives of this sort resonated with the prevailing discourse surrounding “modernity,” which has been explored in scholarly discussions of “hygienic modernity” (Rogaski 2004), “theater etiquette” (Xiao 2006), and the presentation and imagination of modern life in popular print media (Ye 2003), to name just a few.

If we compare the advertisement for the Isis with Wang Dungen's 1912 essay on his experience at a nickelodeon-style theater and with an American government official's report on the Odeon Theater, a "half-million dollar theater located on the North Szechuen Road extension" (North 1927: 15), which opened in 1925, we find an additional interesting point of reference for our understanding of "spatial modernity." All three authors present vivid descriptions of the architectural features, seating, and ventilation or sanitation of their respective theaters. Whereas the nickelodeon Wang attended was a "shabby shack" furnished with "shabby wooden chairs" and a "ragged cloth curtain" for a door (1912), the Isis had "spectacular" architecture, "sophisticated" interior and "spacious" seating, and the Odeon embodied "the latest in theater architecture," with an interior "in light blue and cream and prettily decorated," furnished with seats "of modern theater design" and "heavily upholstered" (North 1927: 15). Whereas Wang was almost "choked to death" by the disgusting smells and cigarette smoke in the air, the Isis was "well ventilated" and the Odeon had separate "smoking rooms" that were "commodious and well furnished."

In his analysis of "Shanghai Modern" film culture in the 1930s and 1940s, Leo Ou-fan Lee (1999: 117) argues that "it was the architecture of Shanghai's newly built movie palaces, together with their marble-floored lobbies and Art Deco design, not to mention the comfortable seats, that became the 'spectacle,' dazzling the eyes and senses of the spectators" and transformed movie viewing into a "new social ritual of *going* to the movie house." The Isis belonged to this "modern" spectacle; its spatial features differed remarkably from its Chinese predecessors, most of which derived from traditional Chinese teahouses (*chayuan*) and preserved much of their spatial characteristics. A comparison of two pictures (fig. 4), one of a 1910s teahouse that screened films and the other of the interior of the Grand Theater (Da guangming) founded in 1928 in Shanghai, gives us a clear sense of the spatial difference already been manifest in my comparative readings of the texts about the nickelodeon, the Isis, and the



Figures 4a and 4b: Taihe Lou Teahouse (*Shenbao*, Jan. 6, 1910) (top); Grand Theatre (ca. 1930s, Shanghai tushuguan 2007: 62) (bottom).

¹⁰ For analyses of the *Shenbao* picture and the Grand Theatre, see, respectively, Chen 2007: 55, and Lee 1999: 84.

Odeon.¹⁰ It is in this way that the Isis, along with other theaters of its kind, represented one of the “urban public sites of modernity” (Lee 1999: 118) and introduced to the Chinese moviegoing public a new spatial experience that they could hardly imagine before. For example, as Joshua Goldstein has demonstrated, whereas the space of the Qing teahouse was organized to facilitate the differentiation of social hierarchies, customers of various social backgrounds in the Republican-era playhouse were treated with equal respect, and he argues that “the modern playhouse concretized a shift in everyday epistemology, a basic change in how representation was being constructed and experienced in China’s modernizing cities” (2003: 754). The spatial experiences of patrons of the Isis should have contributed to this shift of everyday epistemology.

From the textual materials discussed earlier, I conclude that the Isis fostered unique contact relations at two levels. At the material level, its location in the “contact zone” allowed it to have relatively lower operating costs and at the same time offer all the modern amenities of theaters in the foreign concessions, introducing “spatial modernity,” as well as related notions of hygiene, comfort, and decency. Here, the contact relation takes on an ingenious mixture of “Chinese” and “Western” elements. Concomitantly, at a broader cultural level, the material features of the Isis brought about a more extensive involvement of the Chinese in the imported cinema culture. It could be conjectured that Wang Dungen, who was scared by the “hell-like” Chinese nickelodeon, must have felt comfortable at the Isis. Many people of Wang’s like, such as journalists, writers, and the earliest film directors, were frequent patrons of the Isis. For example, Zhou Jianyun (1893–1967), a theater critic, editor, and film company manager, made a passing reference in an article to a film starring Mabel Normand once screened at the Isis (Zhou 1924). This tellingly indicates that he was quite familiar with the films shown at this theater. Judging from the fact that the lowest tier of admission was only \$.10, lower-middle-class residents of Shanghai could have afforded access to

the “spatial modernity” the Isis offered.

In this light, the Isis can be seen as a “contact zone,” which Pratt has defined as “the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations” (1992: 6). It is true that asymmetrical relations of power prevailed in the semicolonial city of Shanghai. Nevertheless, when zooming in on a “microhistory”—in this case, of the specific historical space of the Isis—we find that asymmetrical relations were reshaped through indigenous practices. Contact relations are always amorphous, never uniform. The case studies that follow further illustrate this point.

The Thief of Bagdad: Making the Offensive Invisible

On February 28, 1925, Douglas Fairbanks’s film *The Thief of Bagdad* (translated in Chinese as *Yuegong baohe*, literally, “treasure box in the moon palace”) began to show at the Isis. The film was fairly popular with the Chinese audience, running for twenty-one days at the Isis alone.¹¹ To cater to Chinese taste, the film’s advertisements placed particular emphases on the Chinese elements the film contained, such as the Chinese American movie star Anna May Wong (1905–61), who played the role of a Mongolian slave, and thousands of Chinese extras.¹² Ironically, it is exactly these Chinese elements that aroused a great deal of controversy during the period of its initial screenings and even several years afterward. How did the managers of the Isis deal with the controversies, and what role did the theater’s geographical position play? What kind of contact relation does this example reveal, and what broader historical meaning does it imply?

The Thief of Bagdad, a film in the fantasy genre culled from *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights*, tells the story of a thief who falls in love with the daughter of the Caliph of Bagdad and eventually wins her with a magical treasure he obtains after a dangerous journey.¹³ Premiering in March 1924 in New York, the film was “an instant hit” because of its fascinating story, magnificent camera effects, and spectacular settings (Anon. 1924). When

¹¹ See advertisements in *Shenbao* (Feb. 28–Mar. 20, 1925).

¹² See *Shenbao* (Feb. 28, 1925): 1.

¹³ This brief plot summary and the following analysis of certain scenes are based on the film itself, which is available on the DVD format.

¹⁴ See, for example, Zong 1925. For a detailed study of Anne May Wong and her engagement with the discourse of "Orientalism," see Wang 2005; Hodges 2004: 159ff.

shown in China, however, parts of the film annoyed some Chinese spectators. The Chinese discontent mainly arose from the negative characterization of a Mongolian prince, one of the suitors of the Princess of Bagdad, a young man who is portrayed as crafty and dishonest. A Chinese film reviewer complained, for example, that the film was "insulting to the dignity of the Chinese people" because it focused exclusively on the "ugly side" of the Chinese and was not historically accurate in terms of the Mongolian prince's mixed clothing styles. The reviewer also lamented that the Chinese American actress Anna May Wong played a humble character, a Mongolian slave (Wu 1925). In fact, dissatisfaction with Wong's demeaning roles in Hollywood film was widespread in the Chinese press at the time.¹⁴

Most offensive were the scenes in which Fairbanks seizes two Mongolians by the queues, beats them, and throws them from a veranda. These scenes were deemed so derogatory that four years later, when Fairbanks came to Shanghai, the Chinese public agitated against his visit because of these "misrepresentations." But at the moment when *The Thief of Bagdad* was running at the Isis, how did the managers of the movie theater react to this situation? According to an article published shortly after the film's screening, the managers of the Isis agreed to remove the offensive scenes in response to viewers' requests. The author of the article remarked: "If the film were shown at a theater run by Westerners, who would refuse to delete the derogatory footage, how would Chinese audiences feel when watching the film?" (Kai Zhi 1925).

His question invites us to ponder the intriguing role of *spatiality* as a distinctive lens through which to investigate historical entanglements. At one level, the story again illustrates that space matters in (re)shaping the contact relation. The logic behind Kai Zhi's comment is that because the Isis was run by Chinese and located in Chinese territory, the managers of the theater had both the urge and the power to make the derogatory representations invisible. In other words, spatiality suggests in this case the possibility of rectifying an asymmetrical power relationship. This

point can be further illustrated if we compare this event with the Chinese protest of Harold Lloyd's *Welcome Danger* (dir. Clyde Bruckman, 1929), which was screened in early 1930 at the Grand Theatre, Shanghai's most deluxe first-run movie house, which was located in the very center of the International Settlement.¹⁵ A member of the audience, the American-educated playwright and theater professor Hong Shen (1894–1955), who felt hugely insulted by the film's offensive portrayals of Chinese characters, mounted the theater's stage to call for a boycott of the film. A large portion of the audience answered his call and streamed to the box office to demand refunds. The theater managers panicked and called the foreign police, who detained Hong Shen for several hours.¹⁶

Whereas the managers of the Isis adopted measures of "self-censorship" by cutting "offensive" scenes in *The Thief of Bagdad*, the Grand Theatre took no preemptive action with *Welcome Danger*'s "insulting" content. As Hong Shen's memoir clearly indicates, it was the Grand Theatre's "Western manager" (*Xiren jingli*) who was asked by its Chinese chief manager to talk to Hong Shen in *English*, and it was three "Western policemen" (*xibu*) who later took Hong Shen to the police station located on Avenue Road, one of the main streets in the International Settlement (Hong 1996: 1004; all emphases mine). Clearly, the geographical position of the Grand Theater at center of colonial power worked hand in hand with linguistic (English) and ethnic (Caucasian) elements and contributed both real and symbolic power to the suppression of the local Chinese protest. My comparison of the two events demonstrates that space matters in terms of establishing different relationships between the colonizers and the colonized, colonial domination and Chinese nationalist resistance.

The second layer of meaning of *spatiality* in these cases can be analyzed with French philosopher Michel de Certeau's (1985: 91–130) theory on "spatial practice." Certeau makes a distinction between "space" (*espace*) and "place" (*lieu*) and states that "*space is a practiced place*." He adds that "the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed

¹⁵ The Grand Theatre was located on the Bubbling Well Road (Nanjing Road today), the main street of the International Settlement, and was exactly opposite the Race Course, the eldest British colonial establishment and a symbol of the British presence in Shanghai.

¹⁶ See Hong 1930: 1003–1006. The event, widely known as "*Welcome Danger Incident*," evoked a strong nationalistic backlash among the Chinese public, and it eventually ended with Harold Lloyd's public apologies to the Chinese. For a careful study of the incident, see Wang 2004: 102–112.

into a space by walkers" (117). Building on Certeau's cues, we can argue that the Isis (and the Grand Theatre as well) was more than a *place* where dramas in moving images were projected on the silver screen; rather, it was a *space* or *practiced place* that was itself a stage for real-life social and political dramas. In the case of *The Thief of Bagdad* and *Welcome Danger*, the "spatial practice" of the theaters was connected to the conflicting discourses of "Yellow Peril" and Chinese nationalism.

Rooted in medieval fears of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasions of Europe and ingrained in the popular imagination since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, particularly in the U.S., the "Yellow Peril" discourse was built upon the belief that the West would be overpowered by the irresistible and dark forces of the East (Marchetti 1993: 2–3). Unflattering stereotypes of the Chinese, along with a few other ethnic groups, proliferated in novels, newspapers, and stage plays during the period. As the film industry grew in the early twentieth century, similar stereotypes, more often than not associated with the Chinese, came to permeated the silver screen: queues, opium dens, bound feet, crime, intrigue, poverty, and exotic inscrutability (Wall 2000: 1–2; Leyda 1972: 30–34). *The Thief of Bagdad* can be seen as a product of this trend. Moving images, of course, had the capacity to reach a broad, global audience. When such "Oriental" stereotypes made their way to Chinese theaters, they naturally stirred feelings and reactions from the local people. At a time when nationalism was surging in China, protests against the negative stereotyping of China and Chinese in Hollywood film appeared frequently in the popular press.

In April 1921, for example, the inaugural issue of the first Chinese film magazine *Yingxi zazhi* (Motion picture review) declared that the journal aimed "to amend the distorted image of the Chinese in foreign films and to encourage Chinese people to produce films that can promote the glory of our country" (Zhou 1921). Zhou Jianyun, the author of the "preface" to this inaugural issue, was by no means alone in voicing this

kind of nationalist sentiment, which, indeed, penetrated not only the fan magazines but also serious journals designed for intellectual readers, such as the *Eastern Miscellany* (Wall 2000: 77–82; Xiao 1997: 37). Seen in this light, it is not surprising that *The Thief of Bagdad* met with an unhappy Chinese reaction. Even four years after its initial screening in China, the film was not forgotten when Fairbanks paid a visit to Shanghai. Despite his popularity with Chinese movie fans, expressions of outrage over Fairbanks's "insulting" actions in *The Thief of Bagdad*, according to Chinese and American media reports, dominated public opinion during his brief stay.

A *New York Times* report of December 2, 1929, declared that due to "local agitation in favor of boycotting" their arrival, the visit of Fairbanks and his movie star wife, Mary Pickford, to Shanghai would be shortened (Anon. 1929b). *The North China Herald*, a major English-language newspaper in China, reported that the municipal Chinese Film Censorship Committee had received "a number of letters protesting against Fairbanks' actions and asking that such [welcome] receptions should not be permitted" because "Fairbanks, in *The Thief of Bagdad*, held the Chinese in contempt" (Anon. 1929a). Although in the end his visit passed without incident, according to an article by Hong Shen (1929), Fairbanks's arrival aroused "confused emotions" for many Chinese. Hong wrote that during a welcome speech, Zheng Zhengqiu (1889–1935), a revered playwright and director, expressed his wish that Fairbanks would "take home with him a little of China's emotion, customs, and actual life," in order to help "the people of the world understand the true state of affairs in China" and "the struggle of the Chinese people for freedom and equality."¹⁷ Lu Xun (1881–1936) even mentioned the event in an essay in which he cited some passages of a public letter to Fairbanks where similar opinions were addressed (Lu 1930: 223–226).

These events and discourse surrounding the screening of *The Thief of Bagdad* at the Isis exemplify the ambiguous nature of a "contact zone," which is inevitably fraught with conflicts and complex contact

¹⁷ See Hong 1929. The sources are quoted in Wall's detailed study of the event; see Wall 2000: 163–167.

relations. However, differing from conventional binary representations of colonial relations, the example of the *Isis* shows us that the “oppressed” colonized were not necessarily impotent. The local people of Shanghai used the geographical and spatial characteristics of the *Isis* to effect a form of resistance to colonial domination. As we have seen, the notion of boundary by its very nature entails the possibility of transgression and of the coexistence of multicultural objects.

The Policed, the Transgressive: Soviet Films at the *Isis*

Anthropologist James Clifford, whom I quote in the epigram to this essay, suggests that the contact zone is a site that exists “along the *policed* and *transgressive* intercultural frontiers of nations, peoples, locales” (1997: 7; emphases mine). The dialectical relationship between “being policed” and “transgression” is perfectly displayed in the spatial practices of the *Isis* as a contact zone. In this section, I examine a peculiar phenomenon that occurred at the *Isis* in the 1930s—namely, the exhibition of Soviet films, many of which were prohibited in the territories under foreign jurisdiction. My analysis illustrates, once more, that space matters in empowering the theater to dance along the “policed” and “transgressive” frontiers, in both geographical and cultural senses of the words.

The geographical distribution of movie theaters in the various sections of Shanghai was extremely asymmetrical. In 1932, for instance, thirty-six out of forty-four movie houses were located in the International Settlement and the French Concession (Shanghai Municipal Council 1932: 145). In 1933, there were only five movie theaters in the Chinese area (Shanghai Municipal Council 1933: 168). Moreover, American films dominated the Shanghai market, with a share of 60 percent in 1933 and 78 percent in 1934 (Shanghai Municipal Council 1933: 169; 1934: 162). Movies imported from Germany, Italy, and Soviet Russia altogether constituted only 1 to 3 percent of the market during the same period (*ibid.*). Film censorship in the International Settlement, the French Concession, and the Chinese city

was under separate control, respectively in the hands of the police of the Municipal Council, the French consulate, and the Censorship Board of the Chinese government. This situation gave rise to the discrepancies in criteria for censorship. Foreign censors sometimes allowed films banned by the Chinese government to screen in foreign theaters while banning others approved by Chinese officials (see Xiao 1997: 47–48). Normally, less than 5 percent of the feature films reviewed by the police of the Municipal Council were proscribed in the areas under its jurisdiction.¹⁸ As one of the few movie theaters located in the Chinese zone, the Isis fully exploited its geographical “advantage” to show movies banned by the Municipal Council as a special attraction. This was an open secret, mentioned in many contemporaries’ memoirs or diaries. For instance, a brief note in the popular writer Bao Tianxiao’s diary for October 12, 1934, declares, “Films banned in foreign concessions are bound to be shown at the Isis Theater.”

For the managers of the Isis, such acts of “transgression” might have been nothing more than a financial consideration, a way of surviving in the highly competitive, foreign-dominated cinema market. When banned films were shown at the Isis, advertisements invariably highlighted the fact that they were “Forbidden in the Foreign Concessions” (*zujie jinying*), apparently to raise popular curiosity and to draw a larger audience to seek out the forbidden pleasures offered by this special “no-man’s land” in Hongkou. Taboo topics on display in the films varied and were not exclusively confined to the politically sensitive. Hollywood films produced before the Hays Code, which feature “immoral” or “obscene” content, for example, could often be seen at the Isis. *The Primrose Path* (dir. William A. O’Connor, 1931), which features a naïve high school girl whose ignorance in the matters of sex leads to pregnancy and heartbreak, was advertised as a film “strictly prohibited by the Foreign Settlement authorities” and was only available at the Isis.¹⁹ Such examples are abundant.²⁰

In addition to Hollywood films of this kind, Soviet movies constituted a large portion of the “banned” films shown at the Isis. As a result of

¹⁸ The numbers of the prohibited films are: 12 out of 667 in 1931, 14 out of 562 in 1932, 34 out of 590 in 1933, 15 out of 723 in 1934. See Shanghai Municipal Council 1932–34.

¹⁹ *Shenbao* (Sept. 29, 1933): 10.

²⁰ For example, *The Misleading Lady* (dir. Stuart Walker, 1932, Paramount), screened at the Isis around December 25, 1933; *Thirteen Women* (dir. George Archainbaud, 1932, RKO) around December 7, 1934; and *Bad Company* (dir. Tay Garnett, 1931, RKO) around January 1, 1935.

the restoration of diplomatic relations between China and the USSR in December 1932, screening Soviet films became legal in areas under Chinese jurisdiction. In foreign settlements, however, screening Soviet films was a sensitive issue, and the Municipal Council decreed that “any film that carries political message” should be handled carefully (Shanghai Municipal Council 1933: 17). Moreover, grandiose first-run theaters in the foreign concessions had long been a reserve of Hollywood productions. For these reasons, it was indeed a wise strategy for Soviet distributors to turn to the Isis for cooperation (Jiang 1959). Situated at a geographical contact zone, the Isis thus became entangled in a complex contact relation among global powers in the chaotic moments prior to World War II. Seen through the prism of Certeau’s conceptualization of *place* versus *space*, the physical *place* of the Isis became a *space* (practiced place) where aggravating tensions among the Western powers and with China were played out. But in the first place, by showing Soviet movies, the Isis introduced a challenge to the domination of Hollywood film culture in China.

Soviet movies did not enter the Chinese cinema market in any significant numbers until the mid-1930s. In the 1920s, there were only sporadic screenings of documentaries and experimental films, such as *Battleship Potemkin* (Bronenosets Potyomkin, dir. Sergei M. Eisenstein, 1925) shown in Shanghai in 1926 (Cheng 1963: 139). The Isis was the first commercial movie theater to sign a contract with Soviet distributors, initially with one referred to in Chinese sources as “Mingxin” and later with one called “Yazhou.”²¹ On February 16, 1933, the Isis introduced to its audience the first Soviet film it imported, *The Road to Life* (Putyovka v zhizn, dir. Nikolai Ekk, 1931), which tells the story of how Moscow’s homeless children are reformed into useful members of society in order to propagate the achievements of the first Five-Year Plan of the USSR. Statistics based on newspaper advertisements show that nearly thirty Soviet movies were shown at the Isis from 1933 to the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in July 1937. Many were productions of the Lenfilm Studio (Kinostudiia

²¹ Jiang 1959: 24. See also *Shenbao* (Oct. 12, 1934): 10; and *Shenbao* (Nov. 5, 1936): 5.

Lenfil'm), the most successful Soviet studio in the 1930s (Rollberg 2009: 403), such as *Chapayev* (1934), by the Vasilyev brothers, and *Dubrovsky* (dir. Aleksandr Ivanovsky, 1936), adapted from Pushkin's novel.²² With one or two exceptions, none of the films screened in Settlement movie houses. Only a small number ran at other cinemas in the Chinese area.²³

With their distinctive artistic style and content, these Soviet films aroused widespread interest among intellectuals and students in Shanghai (Chen 1934). It is well known that Lu Xun viewed at least six Soviet movies at the Isis before his death in October 1936.²⁴ Many writers of the Left-wing League may have been among the Isis audience of Soviet films too. We can find in contemporary newspapers' film columns a number of reviews of Soviet movies written by Left-wing League writers, such as Ling He (1933a, 1933b). Interestingly, these films also attracted popular writers of the so-called Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies School (*Yuanyang hudie pai*), such as Bao Tianxiao (1934), who noted in his diaries his attendance of at least two Soviet movies at the Isis, and Chen Dieyi (1934), who wrote a review of the Soviet film *Marionettes* (*Marionetki*, dir. Yakov Protazanov, 1934) in the *Xinwen bao*. Apart from these writers, university and high school students were another important target group, and the publicists for the Isis seemed to have been fully aware of this fact. Lower ticket rates were sometimes offered exclusively to students in order to attract this low-income clientele.²⁵

By publicizing and screening Soviet movies, the Isis (and its physical space) worked in tandem with the space of print media—both of which may be suitably understood as concrete spatial forms of what Jürgen Habermas calls the “public sphere”—and noticeably generated an anticolonial discourse critical of imperialism and capitalism and supportive of the Soviet social system. In perusing contemporary newspapers, even if we limit our search to film-related content, we can see that the Soviet Union and its developments in culture received an increasing amount of media exposure in China. Such reports or discussions often include

²² See *Shenbao* (Dec. 21, 1936): 8; and *Shenbao* (Oct. 9, 1936): 10.

²³ As far as my research on *Shenbao*'s film advertisements shows, only two Soviet films showed in Settlement cinemas: *Sniper* (dir. Semyon Timoshenko, 1932) (see *Shenbao*, Jan. 24, 1935: 4) and *And Quiet Flows the Don* (dir. Ivan Pravov and Olga Preobrazhenskaya, 1931) (see *Shenbao*, Jun. 14, 1933: 12). Films shown at other Chinese cinemas include *Storm over Asia* (dir. Vsevolod Pudovkin, 1928) (see *Shenbao*, Apr. 7, 1933: 4).

²⁴ The six movies are: *The Road to Life* (watched on Feb. 19, 1933); *Marionettes* (Oct. 11, 1934); *Chapayev* (Apr. 13, 1936); *Summer Day* (May 7, 1936); *The Daring Seven* (Oct. 5, 1936); and *Dubrovsky* (Oct. 19, 1936). See Lu 1989: 65, 174, 292, 296, 315, 316.

²⁵ See the advertisement for *Chapayev* in *Shenbao* (Apr. 19, 1936): 9.

²⁶ See *Shenbao* (Feb. 6, 1933): 8.



Figures 5a and 5b: Advertisements for banned Soviet movies (*Shenbao*, Sept. 8, 1933: 6; June 13, 1937: 6)

²⁷ For the former film, see *Shenbao* (Sept. 8, 1933): 6; and Yao 1933. For the latter, see Davies 2005: 209; and *Shenbao* (Oct. 17, 1936): 7.

a comparative perspective, with capitalist or imperialist societies as the object of comparison. An advertisement for *The Road to Life*, for example, announced that the film was “intended to educate the masses” and featured no depictions of “women’s legs and gentlemen’s top hats”—apparently a reference to Hollywood entertainment films.²⁶ In a translated article about film culture in Russia published in the *Shenbao*, the author states that while European and American movies served the purpose of entertainment, Soviet films were aimed at education and propaganda (Messel 1933). In Bao Tianxiao’s diary for October 12, 1934, his short comment on *Marionettes* reads: “*Marionettes* is a satire. Soviet productions always have a distinctive flavor.” The “distinctive flavor” implies its difference from Hollywood productions. Leftist writer Ling He’s (1933a) review of *And Quiet Flows the Don* is more explicit: “This is a production created outside of capitalist culture. No depictions of decadence or debauchery can be found in it. It differs tremendously from European and American films.”

Taken together, these voices indicate that Soviet cinema culture represented a noteworthy “other” to the hegemony of Hollywood movies in China. The location of the Isis on the periphery played a key role in generating this competing discourse. However, by showing Soviet films, the Isis inserted itself into a disputed space of negotiation between the policed and the transgressive, a space that carried an ideological imprint specific to the period—namely, the widespread Western antagonism toward the young Bolshevik state.

Many Soviet movies were censored in the foreign concessions, such as, to name just a few, *Golden Mountains* (Zlatye gory, dir. Sergei Yutkevich, 1931; fig. 5a), which depicts an antiwar strike at a factory in Saint Petersburg and focuses on class conflict between the “proletariat” and “bourgeoisie”; and *Marionettes*, about a fascist state that chooses a prince to be its puppet king.²⁷ Themes about the Bolshevik Revolution and proletarian strikes were undoubtedly considered undesirable from the British and French censors’ point of view. In addition, as political unrest and military conflicts between

Western powers intensified on the eve of World War II, films on the theme of war became sensitive. As early as January 1931, the German consul in Shanghai appealed to the chairman of the Municipal Council to prevent the showing of what he called “War-films” because he felt that depictions of antagonism between Western countries were specially “undesirable in an International Settlement, where the nationals of many countries reside in close proximity and are bound frequently to meet each other in a friendly spirit” (Shanghai Municipal Archive U1-3-4049). Furthermore, he expressed his concerns over “the prudence of showing continually to a Chinese public scenes of fighting between white races” (ibid).

Six years later, an incident triggered by a war film occurred at the Isis. On January 21, 1937, the theater began to show *Abyssinia* (Abissiniya, dir. Vladimir Yeshurin and Boris Zeitlin, 1936), a war documentary about the Second Italo-Abyssinian War of 1935–36, which resulted in the Italian military occupation of Ethiopia. The film was declared in its advertisement to be about “a weak nation’s resistance against a strong enemy and the imperialist invaders’ cruel massacre of the people of the weak nation,”²⁸ and it was soon proscribed by the Chinese authorities out of fear of provoking a confrontation with Italy. A month later, with most of the provocative scenes having been cut, the film screened for two days. However, on the first day of its rerunning, more than a hundred Italian soldiers vandalized the theater, burning the print of the film and injuring dozens of spectators (Anon. 1937). The incident engendered great popular resentment. More than a hundred Chinese intellectuals signed an open letter, deploring the Italian soldiers’ act of violence and exclaiming at the end of the letter: “Viva the Abyssinian war for national independence! Viva China’s sovereignty and liberation!” (Ding et al. 1937). In this way, the Isis Theater, as a *practiced place*, participated in the rising fervor of nationalism on the eve of the war with Japan.

The Isis reopened in June 1937 and continued to screen Soviet films in this last month of its life. Four Soviet films screened during this period

²⁸ See *Shenbao* (Jan. 21, 1937): 6.

²⁹ For *We Are from Kronstadt*, see *Shenbao* (Jun. 13, 1937): 6; for *The Generation of Conquerors*, see *Shenbao* (Jun. 25, 1937): 6; for *Spain in Flame*, see *Shenbao* (Jul. 1, 1937): 6; and for *Blow for Blow*, see *Shenbao* (Jul. 14, 1937): 6. I have been unable to find filmographic references for the last three films.

dealt with themes of war and revolution: *We Are from Kronstadt* (My iz Kronshtadta, dir. Efim Dzigan, 1936), telling a heroic story about the postrevolutionary Russian Civil War (see fig. 5b); *The Generation of Conquerors*, about the Bolshevik revolution in St. Petersburg; *Spain in Flame* about the Spanish Civil War; and *Blow for Blow*, a documentary about the Soviet Red Army's preparation for the coming war.²⁹

In July 1937, the Isis closed for routine summer renovation and never had a chance to reopen. A month after the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese war, Shanghai was attacked and the city, apart from the foreign concessions, soon fell into the hands of the Japanese imperial army. Situated in the city's Chinese area, the Isis was occupied by the Japanese and was turned into a car factory. Tragically, its demise was again linked with its geographical location.

Conclusion

Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman elucidates the notion of boundary in his book on "a semiotic theory of culture": "The notion of boundary is an ambivalent one: it both separates and unites. It is always the boundary of something and so belongs to both frontier cultures, to both contiguous semiospheres. The boundary is bilingual and polylingual. The boundary is a mechanism for translating texts of an alien semiotics into 'our' language" (Lotman 1990: 136–137). With regard to the boundary that is "spatial in a literal sense," he further states: "If the inner world reproduces the cosmos, then what is on the other side represents chaos, the anti-world, unstructured chthonic space. . . . This travesty world presupposes anti-behavior" (Lotman 1990: 140–141).

The spatial stories of the Isis seem to epitomize Lotman's semiotic understanding of the ambivalent nature of the boundary. Situated near a historical and geographical boundary, the Isis "translated" the alien cinema culture through a combination of "spatial modernity" and affordable admission to the Chinese in the early days of its opening. In doing so, it both

separated and united—separating itself from those expensive movie houses in the foreign settlements and uniting the contiguous spheres by providing the people living on the periphery with cultural objects originating from the center. At the same time, its location on the “other side” of the inner world, that is, within an “enclave” on the extra-Settlement road, perfectly exemplifies what Lotman refers to as “the anti-world, unstructured chthonic space,” a breeding ground for “anti-behavior.” Through the anti-behaviors of deleting offensive scenes in films promoting “Yellow Peril” and of showing forbidden Soviet movies, the spatial practices of the Isis were deeply interwoven with the contestation between the competing discourses of colonialism and nationalism and between bourgeois capitalism and socialist ideology in the tension-laden historical moment of the 1920s and 1930s.

To be sure, the ramifications hidden in the history of the Isis are far richer than I have presented here. This essay is, of course, not an exhaustive study of the history of the Isis Theater; instead, it is an experiment in testing the validity of “space” as a critical perspective in observing culture and history. Our exploration has demonstrated that, in the case of the Isis, space did matter at many crucial junctures of its development, shaping and reshaping the contact relations between, broadly speaking, China and the West. This case can be further understood against the historical backdrop of Western colonial expansion, which brought the issues of transcultural contact, center-periphery relationship, the boundary, among other things, to the fore. Spatiality should be an important and useful angle to rethink this history and its far-flung impact on human life. In an era of globalization, questions relating to space, boundary, and contact are gaining more importance, as the global village has been merging real and virtual spaces and changing in complex ways. Through the looking glass of spatiality, we may hope to garner fresh insights into historical entanglements, as well as their diverse forms and variations in the present.

Glossary

chayuan	茶園
Da guangming	大光明
<i>Dongfang zazhi</i>	東方雜誌
Fuzhou	福州
Guangdong	廣東
Hongkou	虹口
huali	華麗
kuanchang	寬敞
Mingxin	明信
Nanjing	南京
<i>Qiangdao ban butou</i>	強盜扮捕頭
qingshuang	清爽
Qiujiang	虬江
Shanghai da xiyuan	上海大戲院
Sichuan	四川
Taihe Lou	泰和樓
Weiduoliya xiguo yingxi guan	維多利亞西國影戲館
Xiaodao hui	小刀會
xiren jingli	西人經理
xibu	西捕
<i>Yaodang</i>	妖黨
yazhi	雅緻
Yazhou	亞洲
<i>Yingxi zazhi</i>	影戲雜誌
Yuanyang hudie pai	鴛鴦蝴蝶派
<i>Yuegong baohe</i>	月宮寶盒
yuejie zhulu	越界築路
Zeng Huantang	曾煥堂
zujie jinying	租界禁映
Zuolian	左聯

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